AMERICA'S GREAT OUTDOORS -- PROJECT DESCRIPTION

COLORADO: THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT AREA/SCOPE/ATTRIBUTES

Flanked by the jagged 14,000- foot summits of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east and the San Juan mountains to the west, the San Luis Valley contains the Rio Grande River and vast underground aquifer that support working farms and ranches, critical wildlife habitat, and unique recreational opportunities. The San Luis Valley presents a remarkable opportunity for continued and expanded partnership among private, local, state, and federal interests to conserve the unique components of this working landscape, including:

- Extensive wetlands, playas, and riparian habitats that support at least 13 threatened and endangered species and over 160 species of birds, including sand-hill cranes, whooping cranes and the endangered Southwest willow flycatcher;
- Working farms and ranches that support a rural lifestyle and provide food, feed, and habitat;
- A national park, three national wildlife refuges, three wilderness areas and other extensive state and federal public lands holdings that provide important wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities;
- Aquifers that are crucial to sustaining biodiversity and a sustainable agricultural economy;

SUCCESS TO DATE

The San Luis Valley is home to a number of successful conservation initiatives, including:

- The Rio Grande Initiative, which has protected 14,000 acres along the river since 2007 alone;
- The Great Sand Dunes landscape, in which approximately \$35 million in federal funds and \$8 million in state and private funds have been invested over the last 15 years
- Conservation easements on more than 12,800 acres of agricultural land along a twenty-mile stretch of Saguache Creek, representing more than 60% of land holdings along the creek
- The Rock Creek Heritage Area project, which has protected more than 8,000 acres between the BLM, USFS uplands and the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge

NEXT STEPS

Through the America's Great Outdoors Initiative (AGO), the Department of the Interior and other federal agencies will work with the State, local stakeholders, private landowners, and other partners to help conserve healthy lands, waters and wildlife and promote tourism in the San Luis Valley and the Rio Grande River Corridor. This AGO project will help align federal, state, local, and private interests to conserve the Valley's vibrant ranching community and protect important wildlife resources and wetland habitat over the 100 miles from the northern tip of the Valley to the New Mexico state line.

The Great Sand Dunes complex forms the building blocks for this landscape-scale initiative that would link the Great Sand Dunes National Park, Baca Wildlife Refuge, BLM's Blanca Wetlands Area of Critical Environmental Concern, Rio Grande and San Isabel National Forests, The Nature Conservancy's Medano Zapata Ranch, and a number of conservation easements held by other local, state, and national conservation organizations (including the largest single conservation easement in the state of Colorado, the 80,000 acre Forbes Trinchera).